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Jesuits in Film: Pioneers, Musketeers, Exorcists

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Portrayals of Jesuits in Popular Culture

Stories elsewhere in this issue of *Conversations* detail the political and cultural forces that led to the suppression of the Society of Jesus in the mid 1700s. These years generated a lot of stories that fed the popular imagination. In South America, the government agents who confiscated Jesuit property hoped to get their hands on the legendary hoards of Jesuit gold locked in the vaults of their houses. The fact that they found none simply confirmed how sneaky those Jesuits were, hiding their treasures beyond finding. Treasure maps came to be printed for the gullible: Buy this map and you will get rich. Then there was rumor of a Jesuit letter that disputed King Charles III's legitimacy, which infuriated the king and fueled his purpose against the Society. No such letter has ever been found.

Stories led to literature like Voltaire's *Candide*, which takes place partly in the Jesuit reductions of South America; *Candide*'s beloved Cunegonde has an unnamed brother who was a leading Jesuit there. In Eugène Sue's notorious *The Wandering Jew* from

1844, the Jesuits d'Aigrigny and Rodin scheme to take possession of a family's fortune while Gabriel, a family member who was a Jesuit for a while, shows "the fatal stamp of that enervating subjection, that moral emasculation with which the victims of the Company of Jesus are always branded, when they are not fortunately delivered in time from their homicidal influence." Two centuries later, Modest Mussorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov* presents its own unflattering Jesuit characters.

Jesuit characters still appear in print and film. A southern publisher still puts out anti-Jesuit works in books and comics. More positively, last summer Judith Rock's fourth novel appeared featuring Charles du Luc, a Jesuit scholastic solving crimes in Paris in the late 1600s. And the trend is far from over: coming soon to a theater near you, Laurie Ann Britt-Smith notes in the next article, are two new films with Jesuit characters, *The Jesuit* and *Silence*. And in the subsequent article, Ernest Fontana studies a prominent Jesuit character in Italian literature (*The Leopard*).

Jesuits in Film Pioneers, Musketeers, Exorcists

By Laurie Ann Britt-Smith

Afascination with the ideals and history of the Jesuit order has seeped into popular culture though all types of media, but particularly film. Type the word *Jesuit* into the search window of the Internet Movie Database and this coming attraction pops up: *The Jesuit* (2014) "A man nicknamed 'the Jesuit' is imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit. When his wife is murdered and his son kidnapped to Mexico, he devises an elaborate and dangerous plan to rescue his son and avenge the murder." This kind of vigilante story is ubiquitous in the crime/thriller category,

but one has to wonder at this attempt to goose audience interest. Why create a character with that name or try to market a picture with that title? There is some kind of pop culture shorthand at work that connects the concept of *Jesuit* to the willingness to go to an extreme in the cause of correcting a serious injustice. Whatever the genre, this is not the only incident of this type of characterization. Movies, for better or worse, are primary texts in American culture and have tremendous influence in establishing definitions, prejudices, and personal values. For those unfamiliar

with the term, the identifier *Jesuit* can be set into context only through what they have seen and heard. So how do our movies answer the question, “What is a Jesuit?”

Many films featuring Jesuits are historical dramas; however, the film that ranks first in keyword searches is one of the most infamous horror movies ever produced, *The Exorcist* (1973). Although Jason Miller’s Father Karras and Max von Sydow’s Father Merrin are never identified specifically as Jesuits, Karras works at Georgetown. Special-effect creep out factors and projectile vomiting of pea soup aside, the audience is left with the impression of two men of faith fighting to overcome their own internal conflicts while engaging in a sacrificial battle with the ultimate evil for the good of the innocent child involved. The film’s iconic image of the man in black stoically marching towards his fate has been etched into the visual language of film and shows up in some form whenever a Jesuit is involved.

In *The Man in the Iron Mask* (1998), Jeremy Irons portrays the retired Musketeer Aramis, who has become not only a priest but a Jesuit, and not just a Jesuit but the general of the order. This ridiculous premise fades into the background as the action sequences kick in, but there are some interesting parallels between the dual identities of Musketeer and Jesuit. Aramis has made a terrible mistake in service to

the king and is now dedicated to correcting the injustice he has caused, even though his odds of success are almost zero. His only hope comes from the community of Jesuits who provide a network of safe houses and from his primary community, the Musketeers reunited and reunified in purpose.

Of course there is a difference between historical fiction pieces like *Iron Mask* and those that are based on historical fact. Several movies feature the Western frontier experiences of Jesuits, and a few filmmakers from South America have focused their lenses on them. Most familiar are *Black Robe* (1991) and *The Mission* (1986). Both are



based on historical accounts of Jesuits in the field. *Black Robe* is set among the Algonquin nation and *The Mission* in the jungles of South America, and both are complicated by questions of colonial influence on and interaction with native cultures. In *Black Robe*, Father LaForge (Lothaire Bluteau) must learn to truly see and speak properly to the native peoples he seeks to convert before they will trust him and the new God he wants them to follow. *The Mission*’s Father Gabriel (Jeremy Irons) learns similar lessons and yet finds himself in the middle of a war he cannot win. Neither his faith nor the military plotting of would-be priest Rodrigo Mendoza (Robert DeNiro) is enough to stop the rush of violence that destroys their work and costs them their lives.

The unifying thread in all these films is dedication to whatever justice these men seek to the point of self-sacrifice. In the best, that dedication persists in spite of serious soul searching and conflict. The evidence of success is found in the relationships Jesuits create, and the greatest tragedy is the destruction of those relationships. Because it runs so counter to many of the narratives of popular culture, there is always a bit of mystery surrounding such deep commitment to faith, justice, and community. Perhaps it is the desire to understand that mystery that continually draws filmmakers to reexamine the history and character type.

Martin Scorsese has announced that his next project is *Silence*. Based on the novel by Shusaku Endo, it follows two 17th-century Jesuits as they witness the persecution of Christians in Japan under the Tokugawa shogunate. It will be fascinating to see how this master filmmaker answers and complicates the question, “What is a Jesuit?” ■

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